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Period 2

AP English

11-9-09

Title Analysis

    My Papa's Waltz by Theodore Roethke has both connotative and denotative meanings in his title. It has the appearance of a father and son waltzing together in the kitchen, but upon deeper observance of the title, it is shown that the father is being abusive to the son.

    The connotative meaning of the word "My" is expressing surprise such as "my oh my." Another connotative meaning is that it is possessive or belonging to me. In the poem, this shows that the man is the boy’s father. The Papa belongs to the boy because they are family. The connotative meaning of the word "Papa" is a father, which has two meanings. The first is a priest of a regular clergy. The second meaning is a man who has begotten a child. The second meaning works in this poem because it is proven that the man in the poem is the boy's father. The connotative meaning of the word "Waltz" is a ballroom dance in 3/4th time with strong accent on first beat and basic pattern of step-step-close. When the poem is first read, it seems as though the boy and father are dancing a waltz together.

    The denotative meaning of the title is that the father and son are participating in an abusive dance. In line one, the son reveals that his father has whiskey on his breath that could make a boy dizzy. This shows that the father is drunk which can lead to abuse. In lines 4-5, it is said that, "We romped until the pans slide from the kitchen shelf." Romped when used with the connotative meaning of the world waltz could mean that they were playing or frolicking in a boisterous manner or gaily, but in the denotative meaning of waltz where the father is abusing his son, it brings on a different meaning. Romp can also mean to win easily or to move in brisk motions, which would connect with the father beating his son. This abuse is supported by lines 6 and 7 where his mother's frown was never replaced by another emotion. She was unhappy with the behavior of the father and son. In the connotative meaning of the word waltz, it is said that there is an accent on the first beat. This also connects with the idea of the father beating his son. The accents represent the action of beating or hitting someone. "The hand that held my wrist..." (line 9), "...my right ear scraped a buckle" (line 12), and "You beat time on my head..." (line 13) are all ways of describing physical abuse.

    This poem has a very creative title in which the connotative meaning is extremely different from what is really occurring. It has the appearance of a dance, when really it is riddled with a dark subject, abuse.